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MEN ACCOUNTABLE ONLY TO GOD FOR THEIR RELIGIOUS
OPINIONS.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE ORDINATION

OF

MR WILLIAM BARRY, JR,

TO THE PASTORAL CARE OF

THE SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

IN LOWELL,

NOV. 17, 1830.

BY CHARLES LOWELL,

MINISTER OF THE WEST CHURCH IN BOSTON.

—◆—

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Mrs. F. L. Gay

It is proper to state that the substance of this sermon was delivered at the ordination of Mr Fessenden, at Deerfield, May 19th, 1830, and the request for its publication was then declined. Circumstances have led to a compliance with a similar request at this time.

BOSTON PRESS, WATER STREET.

S E R M O N.

ROMANS XIV. 4.

TO HIS OWN MASTER HE STANDETH OR FALLETH.

THE whole verse reads thus—*Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth.*

This expostulatory admonition was called forth by peculiar circumstances, but they were such circumstances as warrant us in considering the words as containing a general proposition, applicable in all times. It was a case of conscience to which the apostle referred, and in all cases of conscience, whether of faith or practice, we are to satisfy our own minds, and are amenable only to God.

I infer from these words, in the first place, that men are accountable to God, and not to one another, for their faith. It would seem as if this proposition were self-evident. Is there any one in this assembly who can seriously and deliberately deny it?—I believe not. And yet it has been practically, if I may say so, called in question, not by the Roman Church merely, but by almost every sect of Chris-

tians. Self-evident as it may be, there have been many, in all ages, and all churches, who have not discerned it, who have erected a tribunal, and arraigned their brother, and sat in judgment on his faith, and passed sentence of condemnation, or acquittal. It is because this proposition is denied, or forgotten, or disregarded, that there is so much contention among Christians about the mode of faith. If every man was persuaded that his brother was answerable to God, and not to him, for his opinions, and would act agreeably to this persuasion, there would be an end of all this contention. He might pity his brother, if he knew his opinions, and thought them erroneous,—he might pray for him,—he might labor to enlighten him,—but, if all was fruitless, he would leave him to stand or fall to his own Master.

That we are accountable to God, and not to man, for our faith, I have inferred from the text. The bible is full of declarations to this effect.—But we need not go to the bible to learn it. We may infer it from the reason of things. To God, and not to man, we are indebted for our rational and moral faculties, and our various opportunities of acquiring religious knowledge. God, and not man, is acquainted with our use or abuse of these faculties and opportunities in the acquisition of this knowledge. God is conscious to circumstances which are not known to our fellow men, and perhaps not to ourselves, and which may have an important influence on the result of our inquiries. It is reasonable, then, that He and He only, should sit in judgment on our faith. And it

is so. We may not judge our brother. He may not judge us. And it is *well* it is so. We should not judge our brother so justly, or so mercifully, nor would he judge us with as much justice, or mercy, as God.

In the second place, I infer from the text, that, as we are not accountable to one another for our religious opinions, so we are under no obligation to divulge those opinions (except in as far as we may deem it useful),—still less, to obtrude them on one another. *Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God.* Thou art accountable to God alone; and as thy brother may not sit in judgment on thy faith when it is *known*, so he may not demand it of thee when it is not known. Thou art not called to obtrude it upon him, and it is with great caution that thou shouldst give a bias to his opinion in a matter in which he is answerable only to God. We take on ourselves a great responsibility, my hearers,—and we should deliberately view it as such,—when we inculcate on others our mode of faith. God has given *them* his word, as well as us. If they do not possess it, let us furnish them with it. If they cannot read it, let us enable them to do so. If they are unacquainted with the circumstances under which the various parts of it were written, let us make them known. Is there *anything* wanting to give them a fair, full opportunity of understanding it for themselves, let us supply it, if we can. And here we may stop. If I do not say here we *should* stop, it is rather from a respect for the opinions, and a regard for the feelings of those who would dissent from me. If

we go further than this, it should be with great diffidence, and meekness, and kindness. If we do not go further, and our brother should still remain in ignorance of anything,—it is not essential, it will not affect his salvation. It must be on a subject that is not clearly revealed, and if we interfere, we are probably quite as likely to obscure, as to elucidate it.

But perhaps our brother, on a point of doubtful disputation, has arrived at a result different from ourselves? Be it so.—He has arrived at it with the use of his own faculties, and the exercise of his own judgment. If he has carefully sought the truth, and sincerely followed the best light he could obtain, he is innocent in the sight of God, and even secure of acceptance—as far as opinions are concerned—in to whatever errors he may have fallen. If we could give him our faith, we should do him no good, unless it were adapted to exert a better influence on his life than his own.

We are told that they who hold the *truth* shall be condemned, if they ‘hold the truth in unrighteousness.’ But we are nowhere told that they who embrace *error* will be lost, unless their error is wilful, unless they shut their eyes against the truth. I know that a different language is held by many, and that the adoption of a peculiar mode of faith is considered by them as indispensable to our being received to grace and favor. They have themselves adopted this faith as the faith of the gospel, and it may, or may not, be so. Their error is, not in holding this faith, if it has been obtained by a candid

and diligent study of God's word, but in supposing that the reception of this faith is æssential to salvation.—I say their *error*, for I believe them to be sincere and conscientious, though I cannot but regret that their attachment to a system should so far mislead them, and blind them to the plain, repeated, invariable declarations of the holy scriptures.

The remarks I have made, are, in my opinion, much more applicable to the teachers of religion than is commonly imagined. They should do everything in their power to establish those to whom they minister, in the truth of revelation, and everything to make them feel its influence. Such doctrines as, in their opinion, are promotive of godliness, they should inculcate and enforce without fear or favor. Such as are matters of speculation, and are not clearly revealed, they may as well let alone. They cannot explain what is inexplicable, and why should they attempt it? On such points, it can do their hearers no good to have their conjectures; and as to argument, and reasoning on such points, it amounts to nothing. They may have their faith to themselves before God, and no one has a right to demand it, or to condemn them for it, if it is given.

Besides, if their hearers have understandings as well as themselves, and are accountable to God for the use they make of them, ministers should be very careful how they repress inquiry, or give a bias to the judgment in the search after truth. It is well,—nay, it is essential,—that the faith of their people should be their own faith, and not the faith

of their minister. They may innocently differ from him, and he may innocently differ from them. It is only important that they should be united in the belief of those truths which are easily understood, and in the practice of the duties which these truths impose.

The same remarks will apply to parents. Whilst they teach their children the worth of the scriptures, and, by precept and example, enforce the study of them, let them respect the understandings of their children, remember to whom they are accountable, and allow them to judge for themselves respecting the doctrines of revelation.

I am aware that there are those—and they are not confined to any particular sect,—who hold a different language, and maintain that it belongs to a minister to teach his people what they are to believe; and that, if he neglect to do so, he must be miserable in witnessing the sad spectacle of diverse, and perhaps opposite, opinions in matters of faith. If this doctrine be sound, then the Roman Catholic clergy are wiser than we are; for how much do they promote uniformity of sentiment by withholding the scriptures from the laity, and what a vast amount of time and labor and money do they save, and which is expended by Protestants in the distribution of bibles. If this doctrine be sound, what set of men so miserable as ministers? For where shall we find—nay, where *could* we by possibility find,—a religious society entirely united in their religious opinions?—For myself, I have been compelled to

witness a diversity of opinion, in my own case, for a quarter of a century. It is to me a beautiful spectacle,—a people differing in sentiment, but united in spirit.

It may be well to observe, in this connexion, that it is very common to resort to ministers with the expectation that they can remove all the difficulties of scripture, and solve all the questions which arise in the speculations of an inquisitive mind, or the vagaries of an ardent imagination; and ministers too often attempt an explanation, instead of frankly confessing their ignorance, which would be less discreditable to themselves, and less prejudicial to the cause of truth. If they are *foolish and unlearned questions*, that are thus propounded, they have the sanction of an apostle for *avoiding* them.

In all cases of spiritual distress, when the soul is bowed down with a sense of its sins, and is anxiously inquiring what it shall do to be saved, a minister should be ready to meet every inquiry, and for the faithful discharge of this part of his duty, he should diligently prepare himself.—It was the office of his master to ‘heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and the recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty them that are bruised, to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.’ God the Father hath revealed himself as ‘the God of all comfort; who comforteth those that are cast down;—yea, who comforteth us in all our

tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them that are in trouble, by the same comfort, with which we ourselves are comforted of God.' And it is the commission to his servants, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people; strengthen the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees;—say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not.' Let ministers beware how they disregard this commission, and reject the call for spiritual guidance and comfort, as the dream of a visionary fancy, as the terrors of superstition, as the gloom of fanaticism, or the horrors of a mind disjointed and weakened by bodily disease. It may be so,—and it may not be so.—It is for the minister anxiously to listen to the lowest whisper of distress among his people, and to do what he is able to heal that distress.

In the third place, I remark that as we are accountable to God for our faith, we should be careful to know, for ourselves, on what foundation it stands. This is a solemn consideration to which I would call your attention, with all the seriousness which becomes a subject so sacred, and with all the earnestness which its unspeakable importance demands. You have in your hands a book which purports to be a revelation from God. You must answer to God for the manner in which you receive and use it. Have you a knowledge of what it teaches, and how has that knowledge been acquired? Have you deliberately and devoutly examined it, that you might judge for yourselves of its doctrines, and learn for yourselves its instructions?—Have

you *any* faith? and if you have, is it built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone?—or does it stand in the wisdom of man, and not in the power of God? You may now answer these inquiries to your consciences;—you must soon answer them at the bar of God. You cannot get rid of your responsibility. Another's faith is not your faith. It will avail you nothing to be accepted or condemned by your fellow men. There is a higher tribunal, and before that tribunal you must soon stand.

Go then to your bible, with minds seriously desirous to know the truth, and determined to embrace it, however opposed to your inclination or your previous judgment. The truth you are to seek is not the truth of a sect, but of christianity. Go not as congregationalists, or episcopalians, or baptists, not as unitarians, or trinitarians, but as christians, who have comparatively but small respect for *human* teachers, and desire to know what Christ hath taught.—Go, read it, not as you would read a history, or a work of science, or any other book, but, as it is, the word of God, remembering that He who indited it alone can enlighten your minds that you may understand it, and open your hearts that you may receive and feel it. Read it, then, upon your knees,—with prayer. I do not mean that you should retire to your closet, whenever you take your bible, but that, at least, from the 'secret chambers' of the heart, and in language which is audible only to God, a prayer should ascend for divine illumination,

and divine grace. *Open Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law. Hide not thy commandments from me. Lighten my darkness. Sanctify me through thy truth.*

Nor is it for our faith alone that we are accountable ;—much more for the results of that faith, must we give an account to God. With many christians their faith is a delusion, a superficial, transient principle, floating upon the surface, which has never taken possession of the mind. With many, too, their faith,—sincere and earnest it may be,—is employed about speculations, and expends itself in explaining what God has left unexplained, in defining what has been left undefined, and thus the head is often stored (shall I say with knowledge ?) at the expense of the heart ; the mind is roving in the airy regions of metaphysical theory, and the sober realities of life are neglected, or deemed of minor importance.

Genuine faith is operative. It ‘ works by love, it purifies the heart, and overcomes the world.’ ‘ Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works.’ Do we reflect, with a believing heart, on the love of God, who sent forth his Son to save us,—on the love of Christ, who died for our sins, our hearts will *burn within us*, and we shall feel ourselves constrained *to live no longer to ourselves, but to him who died for us and rose again.*

And here, as in the other case, we stand or fall, not to our fellow men, but to God. We cannot hide ourselves in a crowd. We cannot escape by

connecting ourselves with others. The single, individual being, must stand by himself, and answer for himself, at the bar of his judge. If others have been virtuous, it will not make him so. If others have been vicious, it will not excuse his vices. He may plead what he has done that he ought to have done, and what he has left undone that he ought not to have done, and it will be heard in his behalf. But the merits, or demerits, of others will be of no avail to him. They, like him, must stand before the judgment seat, and answer for themselves. They will have enough to do, through the mercy of God, and the mediation of Jesus Christ, to secure their own salvation. They will have no goodness to spare,—they have performed no works of supererogation that can be set down to the account of others. It will be well, if they have done enough to make their *own calling and election sure*.

The time is hastening on when a sentence of condemnation will be passed on the faith that has been barren and unproductive of the fruits of holiness.—It may be near at hand.—*Now is the accepted time. Now.* It is not to-morrow. It is to-day. It is not the next hour. It is the present moment,—for the present moment only is ours. We have as little hold upon the future, as we have upon the past. The one is gone,—irretrievably gone. The other has not yet come,—and may never come to us. If we defer the work of preparation a single moment, we do it at the greatest hazard.—There are ingenious calculations respecting the continuance of human life; but how

often are these calculations falsified ! They are founded on the presumption that nature will be allowed to do its work in its own way, without the intervention of any other agent of destruction. No allowance can be made for mischances,—for the casualties that in any moment, and in any place, may terminate or shorten life,—for the diseases that may be inspired with the breath, and convert the element that was designed to sustain us, into the instrument of death. No allowance can be made for these, for they cannot be foreseen ; they may come, or they may *not* come. And if they do come, it may be as ‘a thief in the night,’—without any warning. We may now, even now, be standing on the utmost verge of existence.—*Standing*, did I say ? we are *never* standing,—and the next step we advance, may plunge us into the abyss of eternity.—

‘Why are you so slow,’ said one to a Lacedemonian, ‘in passing capital judgment ? Why so many examinations taken, so many defences permitted to the accused, and after conviction and sentence, so long a space of time before the execution ?’—‘It is because an error in such a case, cannot be corrected. We may kill the living, but we cannot revive the dead.’—‘Why do you spend so much time in reading, meditation and prayer ?’ was a question proposed to a pious man. He lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, and said, with great solemnity and seriousness, ‘Forever,—forever,—forever!’—Yes, fellow candidates for immortality ! in this short life, we are preparing to live forever. Let us watch, and

pray, and resist our evil propensities, and, under the banner of the cross, resolutely contend with our spiritual enemies, and travel onward, till our feet shall stand on Mount Zion, and our heads be crowned with immortal glory.

Lord! *increase our faith.* Give us to believe with the heart, that our faith may sustain us in every hour of affliction, enable us to triumph in every time of temptation, and carry us on to the eternal rewards of victory!—Such be our prayer,—our labor,—that the principles of our faith may be deeply rooted in our minds, the momentous truths it imparts habitually present with us,—that we may *run with patience the race that is set before us*, and, with the apostle, be able to say, *I have fought a good fight, and finished my course, and kept the faith; henceforth there is a crown of righteousness laid up for me in heaven.*

In accordance with ancient practice, from which I have seen no good reason to depart, I now turn to him who is to be consecrated to the work of the ministry; and I do this, my brother, in full confidence that the sentiments I have uttered will receive from you, a sincere and hearty response. You have distinctly and emphatically declared that you shall assert and maintain, in your own case, the right of private judgment in matters of faith, and that you shall sacredly respect in others what you thus claim for yourself. You have looked round upon the christian world with the eye of a christian, and finding it divided, and subdivided, into innumerable sects

and parties, you have determined to wear the badge of none of them, but, going to your master for your name, and to your bible for your creed, to embrace all christians in the arms of christian charity. If it were not that it would imply a reproach upon wise and good men, I should say that I honor you for your wisdom,—I may say that I honor you for your independence and firmness, and I honor this people, too, who, by a public and solemn act, have sustained you in your purpose. I have confidence that they will still sustain you, and I have confidence in you, that you will *stand fast in your liberty*, and not suffer yourself to be brought under *the yoke of bondage*. Standing, not *between*, but aloof from, parties, let it ever, as now, be manifest, that you will know among this people, not trinitarianism or unitarianism, arianism or sabellianism, calvinism or arminianism, or any formula of human device, ‘but Jesus Christ, and him crucified.’

In the providence of God, and through the liberality of the religious society usually worshipping here, the circumstances under which you are introduced to the ministry, are strikingly and beautifully appropriate to the liberal course you have marked out for yourself. It will not be your fault, I am persuaded, if your introduction to this pulpit to-day, is not the prelude to christian fellowship between yourself and the minister of this church.

May this spirit of charity be more widely diffused! Cherish it, my brother, and labor to promote it. It is the spirit of the religion you teach.—It is the spirit of heaven.



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